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ABSTRACT

Cumulative school records kept on children generally contain only standardized test scores and random notes concerning conduct, yet some theorists suggest that one of the most powerful tools of assessment is teachers' daily observation. To determine teachers' capability for evaluating their students' reading, a study examined teachers' informal diagnoses of the reading difficulties of 14 subjects, grades three to nine, who had been referred to a reading center for diagnosis and remediation of perceived reading problems. In many cases the child was referred to the center by the participating teacher. Each teacher was sent a letter asking "How does this student learn?" and "What seems to impede his/her learning?" Expectations were that teacher comments would be especially directed toward the reading ability of the students and that comments would specifically relate to the four cueing systems outlined by May (1986): syntactic, semantic, graphophonic, and background. Results showed that teachers' knowledge of their students was quite general at best. Few of the comments reflected the widely held view of reading as an interactive process, and there was almost a total absence of specific strategy statements which could result in direct teaching. Instead, there were many statements involving what impeded the students' learning. (Four references are attached.) (ARH)

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TEACHER KNOWLEDGE OF THEIR STUDENTS' LEARNING STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

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This study commenced on or about December 7, 1964. Upon examination of the cumulative records of Mary (I forgot her last name), an eleventh-grade high school student whom I was concerned about in one of my English classes, I found only a scrap of paper with a terse message scrawled in pencil. This message was the only item which had a direct line to a teacher. It read: "Mary wet her pants!" and was signed by a person who indicated that she was the 1st grade teacher. The only other written items in the folder were the usual lists of test scores. I found it astounding to discover that the only thing shared between teachers concerning Mary over her eleven years of schooling was a bunch of test scores and a meaningless little note.

Though I was tempted to go back to Mary and tell her to "Toe the line" because I knew her very well - that I even knew that she wet her pants in first grade- I resisted the opportunity. I did remove the note and then looked at another student's file. I found the same thing, except no note, just scores. It seemed a viable conclusion that only test publishers "knew" our students. If teachers noticed anything, they obviously had kept it to themselves. There was no sharing of information. Why? Had no one noticed anything?

Today, December 7, 1987 - 23 years later, the questions persist. Should teachers be expected to know about the "Mary"s of the world? Peter Johnston (1987) wrote:

> When parents wish to know about their child's development, there should be no hesitation. A teacher should be able to say 'Let me show you how Jane has developed since last month. This is what she

was doing at the beginning of the year. Last year she had developed to this point' (p.748).

How many teachers could do that? How many teachers think that they *should* be able to do that? I do not think that it is a matter that is dealt with on a conscious level at all. If it was, the cumulative records kept on children would be vastly different than those currently available. Could it be as McCormick (1987) concluded:

> One of the most powerful tools of informal assessment is daily observation, which provides teachers with a chance to diagnose what students can and cannot do in real reading. Most teachers make judgements about the ability of students to handle material in daily work and note areas where more instruction should occur, but many feel hesitant to assume that this is a legitimate form of assessment (p. 119-20).

If such is the case, then much work has to be done to convince teachers that what they do diagnostically is valuable and that they must share it if students are to profit from their expertise as much as possible. However, there is another prominent question that must be asked: Can and do teachers diagnose? Johnston (1987) seemed to address this question when he stated:

> I have a simple test of teacher evaluation expertise which can be used as a self test. Look at the extent and quality of an impromtu description of a particular child's literacy development. Two features which will be most evident in an expert's description will

be an emphasis on *processes* and an emphasis on *what the child can do*.

> Unless we know our children it is not possible to tailor our instruction to their needs, particularly in the language arts, which require a supportive, communicative context. We must observe and listen, and if they will not talk, we cannot listen (p. 748).

Thus, there seems to be agreement that teachers should be expected to know about their students and should be and probably are proficient diagnosticians. Whether they share their conclusions or not is another question. Johnston's mention that there should be an emphasis on processes and on what the child can do seems to fit well the characteristics for good readers pointed out in *Becoming a Nation of Readers* (1985). One would expect to see a focus on strategies. The four cueing systems mentioned by May (1986): syntactic, semantic, graphophonic, and background match well with Johnston's idea of *processes*. We can expect readers to display proficiency in the cueing systems. This study concerns how teachers describe their students' learning.

Subjects and Procedures

Subjects were fourteen (14) students who had been referred to the University Reading Center for diagnosis and remediation of perceived reading problems. In the final analysis, twelve (12) students, third to ninth grade, were included in the study. Two were dropped because their teachers did not return questionnaires. Questionnaires were sent to all

of the known teachers of the students. There was a possibility of 25 returns for the 12 students. The final tally was 15 out of the 25 or 60% return. Three students had two teachers return their questionnaires, while the others had one.

Instrument

Each teacher was sent a letter which stated the following:

_____ has been referred to the Center for a diagnostic evaluation and future tutoring. Since we only see a child for a short time, your input is extremely important in helping us to understand this student. Your comments will aid us in focusing on particular problems that this student has. We also are interested in areas of strength that the child has shown.

Thus the questions are: *HOW DOES THIS STUDENT LEARN?* and *WHAT SEEMS TO IMPEDE HIS/HER LEARNING?* You may use both sides of this form plus any additional paper necessary.

Expectations

The form bore a letterhead indicating that it came from the University Reading Center and in many cases the child was referred to the Center by the teacher participating. The teachers were not aware that their responses were also for research purposes regarding their diagnostic prowess. The author expected that the teacher comments would be especially directed toward the reading ability of the students. It was also expected that comments would specifically relate to the four cueing systems: syntactic, semantic, graphophonic, and background (May, 1986).

Results (Summarized)

HOW DOES THIS STUDENT LEARN?

Most of the replies were very general in nature and did not involve reading at all . Some examples are: a) Auditory learner; b) needs lots of repetition; c) one-to-one (frequent response); d) hands-on; e) with partner; and e) visually & tactually. In the great majority of cases, teachers commented on some strengths such as artistic ability, good personality and/or attitude, happy, etc., instead of addressing the question of how the student learned. Overall, there was very little information that a teacher could use in teaching any of the children. My favorite answer was "I don't know. I haven't given a modality test."

WHAT SEEMS TO IMPEDE HIS/HER LEARNING?

Answers here dealt with two areas: generalized skills and behavior/general attributes. The *skills* area was represented by such comments as: a) hasn't retained decoding skills; b) trouble decoding and misreading words; c) trouble with short vowel sounds; d) misreads or skips words; and e) some reversals. The *behavior / general attributes* area included such comments as: a) distractable-dawdles on worksheets; b) frustrated; c) low self-concept; d) slow in thinking; e) delayed visual perception and motor skills; f) disorganized; g) lacks self-discipline; and h) doesn't follow directions. Most answers were listed for only one or two pupils.

Discussion

This study centered on the extent of teachers' knowledge of their

students. The results showed that such knowledge was quite general at best. Little was connected with the widely held view of reading as an interactive process. There was almost a total absence of specific strategy statements which could result in direct teaching. Instead, there were many statements involving what impeded the students' learning. In effect, one has to conclude that the teachers did not have a very good idea of how their students learned, but quite a bit concerning what impeded their learning. One has to wonder if teachers expect such a question. There seemed to be a lack of concern with the *process* and *what the child can do* that Johnston (1987) wrote about. Could this be due to McCormick's (1987) belief that teachers don't believe in themselves as diagnosticians? Are cumulative files quite lacking in the area of usable teaching strategies because teachers don't formulate them in general and don't have any expectations of giving or receiving any "hints" from other teachers? Have we lost our focus on the individual in our schools? Did we ever actually have it?

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